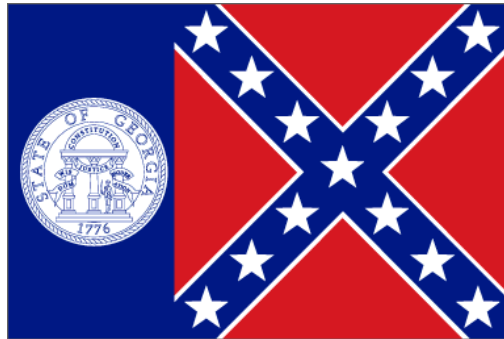


Obsolete Icons and the Teaching of History  
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**1. Introduction: monuments of bygone eras.**

In 1993, I arrived at the airport in Atlanta, Georgia to see this flag flying above the terminal building. Actually, it was a whole row of these flags:



In 2001, the Georgia State Legislature decided that this symbol of slavery and white supremacy was unsuitable as a symbol of the current society, history, and values of the State. Visitors to the airport—let alone the black citizens of the state itself—would no longer live with this kind of reminder of the past.

In May 2008, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission on special accommodation in Quebec recommended removing the crucifix from the National Assembly room. The Premier Jean Charest' response was "it is history": i.e., it has to stay there.



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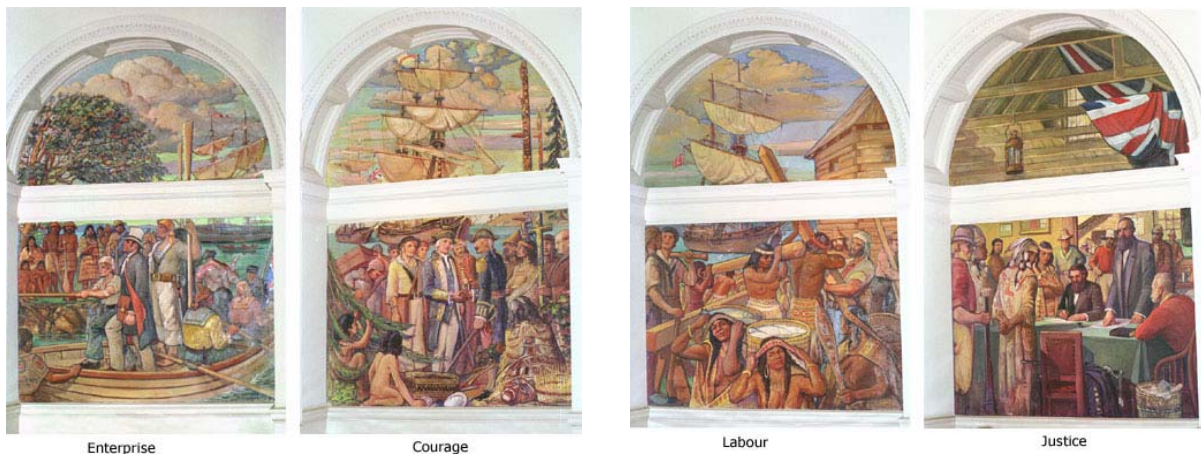
<sup>1</sup> . This panel presentation is drawn from a larger, published paper, Peter Seixas and Penney Clark. "Murals as monuments: Students' ideas about origins of civilization in British Columbia." *American Journal of Education* 110, no. 2 (2004): 146-171.

Around the world people confront icons, symbols, and monuments that celebrate historical origins, movements, heroes and triumphs, no longer seen as worthy of or appropriate for celebration. The Voortrekker's monument in South Africa, the southern American high schools named for Confederate heroes, and the statues of imperial conquerors, were erected to pay homage, to teach young people desirable character traits, and to provide a positive sense of heritage and identity for a citizenry defined to exclude blacks, natives, women, colonials, and/or others.

What is to be done with these artifacts of earlier power configurations, outdated modes of understanding, bygone identities? Destroy them? Maintain them but strip them of their monumental status? Erect alternative monuments to celebrate those who were excluded? Public monuments, along with memorials, school history textbooks, museums, and commemorative holidays, occupy an arena where modern societies define themselves most explicitly in relation to their pasts. They are quintessential examples of what Pierre Nora (1996) has called *lieux de memoire*. As such, they are also pedagogical sites, whose messages are intended to convey values to the next generation. These sites become particularly interesting at the moment when they inspire debate and contention. Such moments offer a pedagogical opportunity: rather than seeking to resolve the controversies before they make their way into classrooms and textbooks, the debates themselves might be mobilized to help develop young people's capacities to construct meanings of the past in a conflict-ridden present.

Controversy around a four-panel mural series located in the central rotunda of the British Columbia Parliament Buildings, offers a prime example of these debates.

## 2. The Murals in the BC Legislature



Each mural is in two parts, with a rectangular section below, which includes the human figures, and an upper section in the vault of the rotunda, which depicts the top part of each scene; the masts of a ship, the sky, and the ceiling of a room. Originally, the title of

each mural appeared on the strip of wall separating its two sections. Prior to 1977, the strips were painted over.

Let's think about the murals as a pedagogical project. Indeed, in their origins they were explicitly pedagogical: in 1932 Provincial Secretary S.L. Howe commissioned the artist, George Southwell, to illustrate "the historical qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization" (Segger n.d., p. 68, quoted in Archibald 2001, p. 11).<sup>2</sup>

In March, 2001 a *Report of the Provincial Speaker's Advisory Panel: A Review of the Depiction of Aboriginal Peoples in the Artworks of the Parliament Buildings* (including Jean Barman, among others) recommended that the murals be removed from the central rotunda. We can only guess how quickly the NDP government would have responded to the *Report*, because on April 18, 2001, an election was called, and in May the NDP was swept from power. Six years later, April 24, 2007, Hon. M. de Jong, Liberal Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation proposed that the *Report* be accepted for implementation and that its recommendation be adopted. The Legislature voted 68 to 3, in favour. The three dissenters argued that to remove the murals was to "rewrite history." ("B.C. legislature murals coming down", April 25, 2007 [CBC News www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca)) Today, the murals are covered over in black plastic, awaiting construction crews.

### 3. The Begbie Contest

In order to understand young people's responses to the murals, we turned to the Begbie Canadian History Contest, a project conceived and developed by retired Burnaby history teacher Charles Hou, in its eighth year in 2001. The test consisted of 30 multiple-choice questions, a paragraph question on the murals, and an extended essay question. In that year, 553 students entered the contest, some because their teachers told them they had to, but many on a voluntary basis. The question on the murals—intended to be completed in about ten minutes—was the following:

There is currently a controversy about the way First Nations people are portrayed in four paintings found in the Legislative buildings in Victoria, BC. Consider the titles of the paintings and identify the elements that likely caused the controversy. Write a paragraph supporting either the retention or the removal of the paintings,

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<sup>2</sup> The four murals were described by Martin Segger (n.d.), in his history of the Parliament Buildings, as:

1. *Courage*. The meeting of Captains Vancouver and Quadra at Nootka Sound in 1792.
2. *Enterprise*. Hudson's Bay Co. Chief Factor, James Douglas landing from the Cadboro at Clover Point to select the site for Fort Victoria [1843].
3. *Labour*. The building of Fort Victoria [1843] (also described as the building of Fort Langley [late 1820s]).
4. *Justice*. Colonial Chief Justice Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie holding Court in Clinton during the Cariboo gold rush [early 1860s]. (quoted in Archibald et al. 2001, pp. 11-12.)

or suggesting some way to resolve the problem. (Begbie Contest Society, 2003, p. 220)

We analyzed about one tenth of these, including a range of geographic locations in British Columbia.

#### 4. Student Responses

The task of analyzing the reasoning behind students' judgments of the murals was complex. We considered their statements related to three distinct but related temporal moments. The first temporal moment involves the colonial past, meaning the time when "civilization" was established in British Columbia, the time portrayed in the murals, between 1792 and the 1860s. The second temporal moment focuses on the 1930s paintings themselves, as a pictorial representation of the past. The third temporal moment is the present. The contest question asked about "some way to resolve the problem," i.e., asking explicitly for a judgment about action in the present. But in their arguments in support of these judgments, students unavoidably included reasoning about the colonial past and the pictorial representations of the past. In the analysis that follows we examine the reasoning that lay behind the judgments about action in the present.

##### *Positive colonial past; fair and accurate pictorial representations (4)*

"It shows what you need to establish a colony." The pictorial representation received no explicit comment from this student. It is no surprise that s/he recommended that the murals be preserved as monuments in their present setting. As this student said:  
I think that if these paintings are accurate then they should keep them up. If it shows that white men are stronger then [sic] the natives then let them stay. Just because it shows them at a lower level than us doesn't mean the paintings are wrong. (#48)

Three other students who saw colonial native-white relations as positive did so because they saw give-and-take in a mutually beneficial convergence of two civilizations. Thus, one said Canada came into being "through much effort and compromise [sic]."

In the painting, *Courage*, it represents the joining of two cultures. The handshake shows that they are willing to work together. In *Labour*, it shows the two cultures working equally and helping each other out. (#23)

Formally, these sentences look like they are discussions of the pictorial representation of the past, but the student uses the representations transparently, to recount how two cultures came together in the colonial past. Indeed, these statements show how tangled is the reasoning about the colonial past and its pictorial representation in the 1930s, despite our attempts to separate them, conceptually.

All four of these students thought the murals should be preserved in their present location.

*Negative colonial past; fair and accurate pictorial representations* (11)

Unlike the examples above, many students understood the *colonial* situation negatively, as one of unjust domination. For these students, the murals were a fair or accurate portrayal of an unjust chapter in history:

Even though these paintings seem racist, it does show historical accuracy for the Europeans defeated the natives and took there [sic] land. (#1)

... that was how it was back then. The Europeans took over the land and fought amongst themselves for it, ignoring the natives that lived there. (#32)

These students were split about what to do with the murals in the present, six recommending preservation. Said one, "It is not a question of whether or not the paintings are racist and discriminatory but a question of history. These events took place and we cannot turn our backs on them." Others suggested removal or alteration: One student (#38) thought the paintings should be removed and replaced with "new paintings of pride, progress, multiculturalism and the willingness to compensate and succeed in our province and its heritage."

*No statements about the colonial past; Unfair inaccurate pictorial representations* (30)

Over half of the responses (30/55) avoided the question of correspondence between an unjust colonial past and an unjust representation of that past, by analyzing the paintings themselves, without any explicit reference to the moral order of the colonial past that they represented.

Hesitant to comment on historical inaccuracy in the details, students concentrated instead on the kinds of messages that they conveyed to the viewer. Thus, looking at the composition of *Courage*, #30 observed:

... First Nations people are on the ground . . . this positioning could be interpreted as a representation of the First Nations people as a base and backward people. As well, the positioning of the ships in the upper area while the art and technology of the First Nations' remains on the very bottom further accentuates the feeling that the British Captains and their technology are 'courageous' and superior over the 'backward' First Nations people.

#29 sums up the problem: "Courage? Enterprise? Labour? Justice? Where [sic] the 'four qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization' extended to all people over every descent? No! The First Nations people were portrayed unjustly, uncourageous, uninvolved and as a cheap work force."

These four paintings are only useful to show the faults in Canadian history, the mistakes of the past. They should only be put up if this is their objective for they show nothing of the qualities necessary for the establishment of a civilization. (#11)

Most of this group recommended destruction of the monument, in one way or another, in the present.

Finally, a group of ten students saw a

*Negative colonial past; Unfair or inaccurate pictorial representations (10)*

These analyzed the paintings as being unfair, but combined their observations with references to and reasoning about injustice in the colonial past:

The scene is not a showing of justice, but a showing of the unjust treatment of natives, who, years after Douglas landed at Victoria, still treat natives as second-class people, inferior to white men. (#6)

This student thus judged not only the historical representation but also the historical reality.

Among the 10 who made similar kinds of judgments, half recommended removal of the murals in the present: and two recommended making additions to historicize and contextualize.

### **5. Conclusion: the pedagogical task of monuments in a historiographic age**

What can we learn about the pedagogical tasks posed by monuments and memorials in a post-colonial and historiographic age, where so many of our monuments are leftovers from a colonial era? When not only historians but also much of the general public, is ready to historicize the monuments themselves? The three different eras that framed the analysis of the students' responses to the monument now make possible a restatement of the pedagogical tasks of monuments in the present age.

1. The era of the monument's construction: people need to be able to see "What messages does the monument attempt to convey, and what relation does it have to the historical context in which it was constructed?"

These young people understood the interpretive nature of the murals and most were fairly comfortable with the idea of controversy over such historical representations. The textbooks they use are peppered with "issues:" "Is today's government responsible for injustices of the past?" asks one of them (Cranny 2001, pp. 10). Another elevates "issues" to the organizing framework for the text (Francis et al. 1998). In the larger culture beyond schools as well, they have grown up on "fractured fairy tales" that undermine the morals of the old stories and popular films that challenge foundational myths. So the students in this sample were at ease judging the murals on the basis of moral baggage that the pictures carry forward into the present. And the majority waded into the controversy using more or less close readings of the pictures themselves.

But the limitations of their arguments also point to some additional pedagogical goals that need to be addressed, if not in the monuments themselves, then in the schooling that prepares them to critically assess the monuments.

2. The colonial moment: People need to know, "What actually happened in the colonial era, how accurate is the history represented in the monument?"

Though some of the students made claims about the “accuracy” of the paintings, they generally did not get far with these arguments, because they had only the most generic sense of the history of the colonial era that the paintings depicted. If the contest exercise had provided them not only with the murals, but with transcripts of Begbie’s court proceedings or journals of Vancouver’s voyage, they might have gotten further. But this points to the kind of work that must be done in museums and schools, in preparation for the critical assessment of public monuments, and probably will not happen at the site of the monument at all.

3. The present: people need to consider relevant factors in judging, what should we do with the monument in the present? How does historical accuracy (or artistic value) matter? How does community response matter? And how should present-day values and consideration of human rights and respect shape the design, placement, and re-placement of monuments and memorials?

Representations of the past have uses in the present. The more that people are aware of the varieties of uses—and abuses—the more sensitive they can be to the historical references and images around them. The didactic nature of these murals was present at the outset. Their message was conveyed not only in how they depicted the colonial encounter, but also in their placement in the Legislature’s rotunda. A thorough understanding of these problems would allow people to avoid the errors of the three dissenters in the 2007 BC Legislature. They will help people to understand the real differences between putting a confederate flag in a museum and flying it over the Atlanta airport, between having murals painted in the 1930s in a museum and maintaining them in the central rotunda of the British Columbia Legislature buildings.

As difficult as it will be, even the removal of the murals themselves does not remove the colonial references from the British Columbia legislature, whose architecture is a monument to the colonial encounter, not to mention the city in which it sits—named “Victoria.” Our best efforts will not erase the colonial past: there is no danger of that. So how should we think, in pedagogical terms, about its legacy?

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